

Transcription: Willie Green

Today is Wednesday, March 28th, 2012. My name is James Crabtree and this afternoon I'll be interviewing Mr. Willie Green. This interview is being conducted by telephone. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. Green is at his residence in Big Spring. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us. As I mentioned before we started recording, it's an honor for us to be able to interview you, and the first question, sir, we pretty much always start off with is please tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the military.

Willie Green: Well, I was born out on a farm in Henderson County, Texas, and brought up on a farm, and that's just about it. We did everything we had to do on a farm to make a living.

Did you have any siblings?

Willie Green: I have, well there were six of us kids. There was four boys and two girls. I'm the second one.

Second oldest?

Willie Green: I'm second oldest, yes sir.

What type of farm was it? What did you grow on the farm?

Willie Green: Well we grew corn, cotton, and maize we called it. I think today they might call it milo. We grew high gear, which is feed for the livestock. We topped the corn stalks and made bumblebees out of it, and all of that kind of stuff.

When you were growing up on the farm, did you ever think that you would end up serving in the military?

Willie Green: No sir, I didn't, not when I was growing up because I had no idea.

Were you still in high school when the war started?

Willie Green: Yes sir, it was during high school. In fact, I made a dropout so to speak. I dropped out and joined the Air Corps.

Do you remember Pearl Harbor Day? Do you remember where you were when you learned that the war had started?

Willie Green: I was a youngster I guess when it all started. I went in, I was sworn in at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, in San Antonio, and I think it was December the 7th 1942.

OK, so about a year later then.

Willie Green: I think it's actually when I was sworn in. And I was barely 19 years old.

Were you drafted?

Willie Green: No, I volunteered.

Yes sir. And what was it that made you choose the Army Air Corps?

Willie Green: Well, I don't know, I don't know whether the airplanes kind of intrigued me or not. I don't know. I think that's what it was. I just kind of wanted to fly, or I thought I did.

Tell us then what that was like for you leaving home and going to Fort Sam Houston.

Willie Green: Well, it was different. I can't really describe it or explain it.

Were you excited or scared, nervous?

Willie Green: I was, I think maybe I might have been excited a little bit, you know, to get out and see what the world was all about.

What was it like when you got to Fort Sam? What are some of your memories of training there?

Willie Green: Well, you had to tow the mark, so to speak, and that really didn't bother me much. It was different than it was say going in and out of the house at home. I had to pull some guard duty when I got there. I think we were there I think the day after Christmas, then there were five busloads of us went up to Wichita Falls, Texas, Shepherd.

Shepherd Air Field, yes sir.

Willie Green: Army Air Base, that's what they called it. And I went into basic training and we went right up through Hamilton, Texas, Even, Texas, and Hamilton, Texas, I went to school at Even in Texas. And we went right up through in Hamilton, Texas, and that's where I was working, and that was different because I could look out the window and roll the window down and waved at one of my old girlfriends. They were having a parade there and we had to stop, and lot of horsebackers and that kind of stuff. I talked to her a little bit. Of course I was still on the bus. I told her I'd see her some day. And that was it, we moved on.

Yes sir. What was Shepherd Air Base like?

Willie Green: Well it was Army. That's what it was all about, and really I didn't have any problem with anybody.

During this time in your training, did you know what you were going to be doing in the Army Air Corps? Did you have a specialty yet?

Willie Green: At the time in basic training, I thought I was going to be an airplane mechanic because that what I was signing up for and everything, was airplane mechanic school, and that's what I was looking forward to, and then whenever they, or we finished our basic training, I'm thinking it was six weeks, I'm not positive. Then they moved us up on the other side of the field to glider mechanic school. That's where they had glider mechanic school.

Tell us, sir, a little bit about the gliders because I think a lot of people don't know much about the gliders and how they were used during the war.

Willie Green: I think the gliders and maybe the airborne troop carrier, that's what I ended up in because they've kind of been forgotten about. It kind of hurts me to realize that there's a lot of people out there that don't know anything about the glider program that they had. They called it the CG40 combat glider, and that's what it was for, it was to take troops into combat, just like the paratroopers. That's what we were, and really they called us the airborne troop carrier.

How were those gliders pulled?

Willie Green: They were pulled by a C-47, and the C-47 could pull two of them. Double-tow we called it. And you had a short tow and a long tow.

How many men could ride in a glider?

Willie Green: 13 combat, fully tripped, fully equipped for combat, and plus the pilot and copilot. It really wasn't many men, you know, but back then it was a lot different than it is today. Then also the C-47 could pull two of those at the same time. And the mechanic had a lot of groundwork to do. The mechanic, when we got into England, the mechanics were all taken out of combat duty. And really the program was the mechanic rode as copilot, and we all trained as copilots. Now I wasn't, in other words, a trained pilot so to speak, but I could fly a glider. I could take the glider off and I could land it, and that's what our training was all about.

What was that like, sir? Tell us what that was like flying one of those gliders.

Willie Green: Well, you just had to go where the tow plane took you.

How about landing it?

Willie Green: Well, landing it you had to, in other words, be sure that you didn't cut loose too quick, and where you can make it to a landing strip to the base. You come in kind of cross-ways and then you would turn down and into the runway. Of course they could land on a cow pasture or could land in a cotton patch or anywhere else like that.

How many landings did you have in one of those gliders?

Willie Green: I don't know. We didn't keep count of it, but we did a lot of night training, training at night, flying at night, and I've flown 'em at night, I've landed 'em at night, and a glider did have landing lights on it, so that helped a little bit. But I've landed 'em at night, and I have taken 'em off at night. But I had a ___ pilot sitting right there in the pilot seat beside me when I was doing all of that.

Sir, I've read about the gliders in Europe and how times when they would land they could tip over or crash and that sort of thing. It seemed like it could be pretty dangerous at times.

Willie Green: That happened, and of course in Europe, you were landing right in the middle of the enemy so to speak, and you landed over there to the side of the enemy, so whenever the enemy were shooting at you, they're liable to land bottom side up.

Tell us, sir, I guess after you completed your training in Texas, you went to England, is that correct?

Willie Green: Yes sir, we had our training in Maxton Lowenburg Army Air Base in Maxton, North Carolina is where we really had our training, and that's where we really got with it.

That's where you actually learned how to fly and land?

Willie Green: Yes, right there at Maxton, North Carolina. I don't know how many groups that there was gliders I think in North Africa, and there were gliders in Italy, and but how many groups overall in a troop carrier I don't know.

What was the hardest part of being a mechanic on a glider? Obviously you didn't have an engine to worry about, but what were some of the things as a mechanic that you had to deal with?

Willie Green: Well, we had to change quite a few wings, I mean inboard wings and outboard wings we'd call 'em. Today you might call it a wing tip, but the outboard wing was just a little longer than the inboard wing. I don't remember the measurements on 'em, but we had to do quite a bit of that, and that took a pretty good operation. Of course you had your cables, strong and you get 'em right, and set 'em with their proper tension, be sure that's all the grooves so the pulleys would work on 'em right.

So you had to be able to make sure that the flaps were working correctly so you could steer and land the aircraft.

Willie Green: That's right, yes. It all had to be right. I have been kidded in my past years about being a glider mechanic. You know, a glider didn't have an engine on 'em.

But it certainly has other moving parts.

Willie Green: My answer to that was the glider had to air-worthy just like an airplane did, and so if they weren't air-worthy, they weren't gonna fly.

Sure, and it wouldn't have been much good to anyone if you couldn't control it.

Willie Green: That's right.

Tell us, sir, about when you got over to England, what that was like.

Willie Green: Well, the weather was bad, which I'm sure you've heard. We were socked in a lot and we couldn't fly. We still had to train, regardless, and regardless of how much training you have, you still have to train, we still had to fly, and that's what gave us a bad time over there was the weather. A lot of times at night we would fly at night when we could, but a lot of times we couldn't fly, and we did have the German bombers coming over, and I've been on guard duty numerous times when it just sounded like, it had this little buzz at the treetops and tails looking for us and they couldn't find us because we were socked in. Sirens would go off, and all, and that kind of stuff. Most of us most of the time would kind of get back away from the gliders and airplanes because they were all, we called it marshal, they were all marshal there, pretty low

together, so mainly the bombers were looking for us and they couldn't find us on account of the weather.

Do you remember, sir, your first mission you actually flew, combat mission there?

Willie Green: No sir, when we got there, they closed the glider mechanic school in Wichita Falls, Texas, at Shepherd Field, and then they grounded all glider mechanics. So the glider mechanics could not even get off the ground unless he had special permission. So I did not fly combat.

When you got over to Britain, what was your role there when they wouldn't let you fly?

Willie Green: Well, we had a lot of work to do on the ground, and had a lot of work to actually get 'em off the ground, and then when the D-Day invasion was made, all of us there on the ground, but I did not fly. But my outfit flew, I mean the airborne part of it did.

Tell us about that day. A lot of people have read about it and of course they've seen movies like Saving Private Ryan, but tell us about your memories of that day.

Willie Green: We were fully combat dressed, everybody, and just like we were part of it. But on the first mission, the initial Normandy D-Day mission that my outfit flew, we flew the British Courser 1 glider. That's what we were issued whenever we got over there was a British Courser 1 glider, and that glider would hold 40 men, fully equipped for combat.

A very big glider then.

Willie Green: It's a big glider and it was more than a C-47 wanted to do, but that's what would pull 'em was a C-47, but it was more than that C-47 wanted to do, and it loaded them up. You take 40 men and the glider, plus copilot, that's pretty heavy. The glider was large and it was pretty heavy also. It was a tricycle landing gear on it. The American CD-four-way combat glider was just a standard, it had a tail wheel on it.

I assume some of the crews that took part in the D-Day invasion, I imagine you knew them pretty well, some of the pilots perhaps.

Willie Green: Yes, we had pilots assigned to our gliders, and they're your pilot, and yes, we knew all the crews, and friends to some of them, you might say. For instance, some of the C-47 crews, the officers and the enlisted men were separated, and I knew all the pilots and I knew all the crew members. Whenever you see 'em taking off like that on the Normandy D-Day initial invasion, it gives you a funny feeling. It was different.

Because you had to have known, right sir, you all had to have known at that point that what they were facing, what you all were facing.

Willie Green: Yes, yes, we knew what it was. And it was actually supposed to have to have taken place on June the 4th, but the weather was so bad we couldn't fly, and they moved it to June the 6th. That's when the actual invasion took place, on June the 6th of 1944.

Yes sir. So when this was going on, you were there helping to get those gliders airborne.

Willie Green: Yes, we were there. I personally was at the middle of it like the rest of 'em was, and whenever the time actually came, some of the guys didn't come back, and that's what hurt, too. When the gliders landed there in enemy territory, the pilots, they had to, they didn't do any really combat unless they had to. Now some of them had to. But they worked their way back to the coast and they caught boats and ships and whatnot and came back to England, because they had to get ready for the next mission. The next mission happened to be southern France, and my outfit made that, made southern France. When the time came, they flew out of England, down around the coast of Spain and Portugal, and up through the Straits of Gibraltar, and into Italy. That southern France invasion was made from Italy, and actually when they made it, some shooter happy sailor out there fired a shot, and well that set off the whole thing, you see, that set off the whole Navy and they started their fireworks, and shot down 28 C-47's and gliders going across there and supposed to go into southern France. But the outfit did make the southern France invasion. That didn't stop 'em.

I was going to ask you out of curiosity, what would they do with the gliders after they landed them?

Willie Green: They were never retrieved.

Oh they were just left there.

Willie Green: Some of 'em tore up, some of 'em probably landed in good shape.

So they really were just a single use –

Willie Green: They just left 'em. While they was making the southern France invasion, the mechanics were in England. We set up an assembly line and we assembled new gliders. They were shipped over in crates, and we had to uncrate them and we had to get them into the assembly line, and we assembled brand new gliders right there getting ready for the Holland invasion.

How long, sir, would it take to assemble a glider?

Willie Green: Well, I don't know. It required a little while, but we assembled 'em and on that assembly line, I was table stringer, you know, string the table to the wings and all that kind of stuff, and be sure that all that stuff is right. There were six guys out of my squadron was in on that assembly line. Really that was my first experience with the graveyard shift.

So you worked throughout the night.

Willie Green: I worked graveyard shift for six weeks, six weeks of graveyard shift on that deal. We assembled, I don't know, 100 or 200 of 'em, however many it was, and then we were getting ready for the Holland invasion, and we made that. At the time, I don't remember the time, but I believe we called it Market Garden. All those invasions had names, and I forget what they were.

Of course Operation Market Garden was a huge undertaking and also it wasn't successful for the Allies, and it involved a lot of paratroopers and gliders.

Willie Green: I was on the sending end of those gliders. And they lost a lot of gliders, of course men, too, a lot of Airborne people were lost, and of course with the paratroopers also, the

jumping paratroopers into those places. And a lot of paratroopers were lost before they ever hit the ground. Then after that, we moved into France.

What are your memories about France?

Willie Green: We were at, well we called it Airstrip 51, and we were about three miles southeast of Paris, and I went over on a C-47, and there was 12 of us men, us glider mechanics went into, let's see, all of them weren't glider mechanics but 12 of us went into, on the advanced echelon they called it, and we went right over Paris, and the pilot flying the C-47 dropped it down to ____, and he went down ____ and looked more or less straight out and I could see the Eiffel Tower. Of course you went by and that just zipped by, and he pulled up a little bit and wasn't just a little while when we landed out there at our airstrip, and then us 12 men had to set in and started setting up tents and all that kind of stuff because we lived in tents. We had a lot of work to do before the main echelon started coming in. They started coming in two days later. We had things in pretty good shape. Wasn't any 8-hour days back in those days.

Sir, when you were flying a glider, did you know when they were going to cut you loose so you would be gliding? Was there a radio to talk to the plane?

Willie Green: Some in the later part of it had what we called inter-tow coms, communication, and then you could converse with the copilot in the C-47.

But early on you didn't have –

Willie Green: The line was a telephone line, was buckled, tied to the tow rope, dropped down and it plugged into a mechanism, it went into the tow ship.

But before that there wasn't any way of knowing, correct? They just cut you loose.

Willie Green: No, a lot of us start with, we were just flying. We weren't, didn't have any communications with the tow pilot, and so like I say, you just went ahead, had to go wherever he went, wherever he took you.

And wherever they cut you loose.

Willie Green: No, you took yourself loose.

Oh OK, I misunderstood. I thought the line they cut -

Willie Green: And then that left the tow rope hanging there, you see, and in training, the copilots then, they would circle, and they'd fly back and had a regular drop zone they called it, the DZ.

So the glider pilots, they had to know where they were.

Willie Green: Yes, we could see the field. Whenever we cut, we could see the field, and then you had to glide into the field and land. Copilot kept going and he circled around and he had a certain place to drop that tow rope. He could cut loose and drop that tow rope, and it would fall, and then the glider mechanics had to gather those up, roll 'em up and get 'em ready for the next flight.

Did the gliders have wheels?

Willie Green: Yes sir, they had wheels and also they had skids. And we practiced some of that, but not a whole lot of it. If you took off, you could pull a lever and you would drop your wheels, your wheels would fall, and then later you would have to land on skids.

That makes sense. I think I've seen pictures of gliders that had landed and it didn't look like they had any wheels, so that makes sense they would have the wheels to take off and then they would jettison those, and when they landed they would just use the skids.

Willie Green: Yes now, but we landed on wheels, we did.

So that was up to the pilot then?

Willie Green: Well, it was emergency stuff, and yes a lot of it was up to the pilot and a lot of it was done in training. Some of 'em when they took off they would drop the wheels, and then they would come in and land on skids. That was all done in training, not a great lot of it that I saw. But in combat, as far as I know they landed on wheels.

And then sir at some point I understand you crossed the Rhine into Germany, is that correct?

Willie Green: Well after, yes, after we moved into France, we made the last invasion was made across the Rhine, and we called it, just sayin' yo-lo we jumped the Rhine. Well the Rhine River was the first time any of the Allied people had been on, I mean real German soil. All these other places where we was like France, and that wasn't German soil, like Holland and Poland, that wasn't German soil, but they had taken those countries.

That's right, sir, when you got across the Rhine you were into the original Germany.

Willie Green: When we crossed the Rhine, that put us on German soil, I mean real German soil.

Yes sir, what are your memories of that, of crossing the Rhine?

Willie Green: Well, it was just like a regular invasion of ours. I didn't fly, I was on the ground, and I did my job on the ground. But the air pilots went.

Were you excited though when you and your unit finally crossed the Rhine?

Willie Green: I was because I thought that the end might be pretty quick. I was ready to come back to Texas, and like a lot of the rest of the guys. As far as we knew, that would be the last invasion that we made, and get across the Rhine. And we jumped paratroopers and we took I don't know how many hundred gliders in there, but a bunch of 'em.

Yes sir. Did you encounter any German soldiers?

Willie Green: No, I wasn't involved in any German soldiers myself. Actually not too long after that, I don't know how long it was, but then the war was over with and it wasn't just two weeks maybe, my outfit started breaking up and the part of it they started sending home were the ones that they were gonna use in the South Pacific when they invaded Japan, and they weren't going

to use gliders in Japan. So they left the glider mechanics over there and they put us into another outfit, army of occupation I guess you'd call it, and I ended up in a 9th Air Force security outfit I think they called it, and I was a security guard. We moved into Erlingen, Germany, and let me think what that was close to, where did they hold the Nurenberg trials?

In Nurenberg, sir.

Willie Green: Nurenberg? OK. Erlingen is just not very far, just a few miles out of Nurenberg, Germany, and I spent four months in Erlingen as a security guard.

How were the German people towards you?

Willie Green: They were nice, they were good, and I think mainly they were glad that everything was over with.

Sounds about right.

Willie Green: But to me, they were good. And we were good to them. The Army did, or whoever showed up, a pretty good-sized, ice cream parlor there in town, but the civilians weren't allowed to go in it. But us guys would go in and get us a little ice cream, but we would take ice cream out and we would give it to the kids, and we'd give those German kids ice cream and we'd give the older German men tobacco they couldn't get, chewing tobacco and snuff. The old timers, they loved snuff, and we'd give 'em things like that. But they were good, as far as I'm concerned they were good to the American soldiers.

Yeah, they didn't give you any difficulties during your time.

Willie Green: No, but there was still shooting going on there, and you sure had to be careful. You couldn't get off of air base. We were living in barracks that the German soldiers lived in. I was sleeping in a room that German soldiers were sleeping in. But we couldn't get off base unless we had a gun.

Sir, during that time that you were in Europe, were you able to get letters from home from your family?

Willie Green: Yes sir, we got letters. I got letters from home from my mother and dad.

I'm sure that meant a lot to you –

Willie Green: It sure did. I wrote mom and dad, well, every week or something like that, and they got letters from me and I got letters from them.

When was it that you were finally able to come back home to the United States?

Willie Green: Well, it was somewhat different. I came home on the USS Breckenridge I think it was, and incidentally I went over on the Queen Mary.

Oh, that's nice.

Willie Green: I was in high time. I forgot to mention that, but we went over on the Queen Mary. But when we landed in Boston, Massachusetts, we had a real good reception. Sirens were going off and little boats running around out there, and they were squirting water about 40-60 feet high in the air, all that kind of stuff. So we got a good reception.

That's great. Now you mentioned you were the second of six children. Did you have an older brother or an older sister?

Willie Green: I had an older brother and he made the North African campaign and he was wounded in Italy. A brother just younger than myself, he volunteered for the Navy, so he was a sailor, and he was heavily involved in that, he was on the USS San Francisco I think, and he was heavily involved I think in this, well the Japanese kamikaze's, those suicide bombers, and he was heavily involved in that mess. But he made it home, and he's passed on now. My older brother's gone and my brother just younger than myself is gone. There's very few of us that are left.

Yes sir. What did you do when you got back home to Texas? Did you go back to work on the farm?

Willie Green: My youngest brother, he was still in high school whenever I got home. Well immediately when he got out of high school in the spring, he joined the Navy also. That was after the war was over with.

So all the boys in your family served in the military. Sir, what did you do when you got back home to Texas? Did you go back to work on the farm?

Willie Green: Well, I farmed for a year, and then my father passed away and then about two months after he passed away, well my brother was still there, mother and all, and so I thought to do better somewhere else, and so I went to Midland, Texas. I had some friends there in Midland, and so I ended up going to work for Texas New Mexico Pipeline Company, Truall Pipeline, and they don't exist today, but I worked 40 years for 'em. Then I retired.

Yes sir, and how many children did you have?

Willie Green: I have two boys.

That's great. Well my grandfather worked out in the Permian Basin, too, worked for Sohio Oil –

Willie Green: Oh, he did, whereabouts?

My dad grew up in Midkiff – yes sir, went to high school in Rankin, and they lived in a Sohio oil field camp out there in Midkiff, which is gone now, too.

Willie Green: My wife's probably, she's sittin' over within five feet of me here just about, she worked for Sohio. He worked for Sohio _____. And then of course they changed their name to what, Marathon?

They might have, I'm not sure. I know they were Sohio when he worked for them.

Willie Green: They changed their name to Marathon.

That's great. Have you had a chance all these years later, have you ever had a chance to see any of those gliders again?

Willie Green: No sir, I haven't, as far as I can remember I haven't seen one after I got out of the service.

My understanding is there is a museum in Lubbock.

Willie Green: Oh, I'm sorry, I missed, yes, I've seen that one in Lubbock. I've been there to that museum.

Yes sir, the Silent Wings Museum.

Willie Green: Yes sir, I've been there and I've been there one time.

Oh that's great, I was going to mention that and if you hadn't been there, I've heard that's a good museum and devoted just to the gliders.

Willie Green: They had a big glider school there. That was to start with, and then they had the museum was in Fort Worth I think to start with maybe, it might've been Dallas, and I guess it was Dallas. But then later they moved it to Lubbock.

Yes sir, that's right. Well sir, I don't think I told you this before we started the interview, but here at the Land Office in Austin we have a lot of historical documents that go back to the 1700s, a lot of old maps and things of that sort, and we have the original register of all the Texas settlers that came to Texas with Stephen F. Austin, and we have the land grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at the Alamo, and our goal with these interviews is to put them into the archives as well so that people can listen to these interviews long after you and I are both gone and perhaps learn something from them. With that in mind, is there anything that you would want to say to somebody listening to this interview potentially 100 years from now? Or longer.

Willie Green: Yeah, well that's good. I don't know. I have a granddaughter that lives there in Austin.

Well sir, my question is, is there anything you'd want to say to somebody listening to this interview 100 years from now?

Willie Green: Well, I don't know what that would be other than I'm still a-kickin' right now, and luck to everybody.

Yes sir, well I want to thank you for letting us interview you today. Commissioner Patterson is a veteran and I'm a veteran, and all of us here at the Land Office, everybody is thankful to you for your service to our nation, and this is just one small way that the state of Texas is able to tell you thank you.

Willie Green: Now your name is what?

James Crabtree.

Willie Green: Crabtree, yes sir.

And your son has my name and phone number, but also I'm going to mail you a package in about a week or so that has all these interviews on CDs and I'm going to put my card in there with it, too, so you have that.

Willie Green: OK, that'd be great.

Well sir again, thank you very much for your time today and most of all thank you for your service to our country.

Willie Green: OK, well that's might good. I'm glad to do it.

Yes sir, thank you and take care.

Willie Green: OK, bye.

[End of recording]